Protecting Yourself Against Yourself

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One of the purposes of the Buddhist teachings is to teach you to be a good friend to yourself, to genuinely wish yourself well, and, as in the chant just now, to point yourself to worthwhile things. And in another passage where he talks about the qualities of a good friend that’s not mentioned in that chant, it’s to look after you when you’re heedless. The question is how you’re going to look after yourself when you’re heedless. This is where it’s useful to think of yourself as many people. There’s a roundtable discussion going on in your head all the time. The question is always posed, “What to do next? What to do next?” And different members of the roundtable will have their different suggestions, and some of them are pretty heedless. You’re not paying attention to important things in life, and you’re getting distracted by something that’s minor, or you get totally wrong-headed notions into your head. It’s good to have somebody inside to alert you to this and to point out a better policy, something that’s safer and actually more in your true best interests. As the Buddha said, “The self is its own mainstay.” The word “mainstay” here can also mean “protector.” You have to be your own protector, looking after yourself. This is one of the reasons why we have to develop mindfulness and alertness, and a sense of heedfulness. Because mindfulness and alertness are not the same thing. Mindfulness can just keep things in mind. Heedfulness has to remind you of what’s really important, where the dangers are. So we develop mindfulness and alertness as part of the meditation. But the heedfulness is what brings us to the practice to begin with. The Buddha describes his own path, the point where he started to get on the right path. After having spent many years wandering off into the woods, into the weeds, into the woods, one of the first questions he asked himself was, “How about dividing my thoughts into two types, skillful and unskillful?” And the two types were based on where the thoughts would lead, what they would do to the mind, what kind of ruts they would create in the mind. If you keep thinking thoughts of sensuality again and again and again, it gets easier and easier to think those thoughts. If you think thoughts of renunciation again and again and again, it gets easier to think those thoughts. Those are the better ruts to get into. Then you realize that thoughts imbued with sensuality, imbued with ill-will, imbued with harmfulness, are going to cause trouble, cause trouble to others as well. Whereas thoughts imbued with renunciation, lack of ill-will, i.e., goodwill, unharmlessness, compassion, would lead in a skillful direction. These are basically the thoughts of right resolve. But then he noticed that even the skillful thoughts, if you thought them for a night and a day, wouldn’t cause any trouble for the mind, aside from that it would get the mind tired with all that thinking. So he realized the mind needed a place to rest, and that’s how he started bringing it into concentration. This shows the direct connection between right resolve and right concentration. The Buddha talks about mundane right resolve and transcendent right resolve. Mundane is thinking thoughts or avoiding thoughts of sensuality, ill-will, and harmfulness. Transcendent right resolve is the factors of directed thought and evaluation that get you into concentration. So there has to be a motivation to do the concentration to begin with, and motivation comes from the realization that if you don’t train the mind, it’s going to get into some pretty unskillful habits. Concentration gives you a better place to be. It’s your refuge from those thoughts. But it also provides you with many other strengths as well. The strength of mindfulness, the strength of alertness, the strength that comes from knowing you have an internal source of strength, well-being. This you can tap into when you need it. This becomes an important refuge on the path. This is when you’re beginning to provide yourself with a good refuge. So it’s the concentration together with the factors of discernment that provide you with your protection. They show you the reasons for why we’re doing this, and they develop the qualities of the mind that will keep you circling. It’s interesting that in the normal Thai definitions of the four bases of success, the fourth one, which is sometimes translated as “powers of analysis,” in the Thai translation is “circumspection.” You look around things from all sides and don’t get carried away. We’re just one topic to the point where we’re really ignoring something important. This is why concentration needs the protection of discernment. When you’re in concentration, you’re focused on one thing. Now, right concentration has the qualities of discernment built right into it, with that direct thought and evaluation. You’re looking at the breath, evaluating how the breath is going, and then figuring out how to breathe in a way that’s more comfortable, that allows the mind to settle down. When you have a sense of comfort, how do you use that? Similarly, in the stages of breath meditation, the Buddha points out at one point that the difference between tranquility and insight is that tranquility is developed by trying to get the mind to settle down and indulge in its object. In other words, indulge in the pleasant breath. Really let yourself enjoy it. Whereas discernment is developed by looking at the whole process of fabrication. What is it that the mind does that shapes your experience of the body? What is it that shapes your speech, shapes the states of your mind? There are three kinds of fabrication. There’s bodily fabrication, where the factor that fabricates the body is the breath, the factors that fabricate speech are direct thought and evaluation, and the factors that fabricate the mind are perception and feeling—perception being the labels you put on things, and feeling being the feeling-tone of pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain. And you notice, as you focus on the breath, you’ve got all those right here. They’re direct thought and evaluation aimed at the breath, the perception of breath that you hold in mind. This afternoon, I had to answer, I don’t know how many times, the umpteenth time, that breath here is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs; it’s the energy flowing through the body. You’ve got to keep that perception, that label of breath in mind, because it really helps as you focus on the breathing. When you’re trying to breathe in a way, think about the breath and evaluate the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure, a sense of fullness, a fullness that doesn’t get squeezed out when you breathe out. You’ve got all these fabrications here as you focus on the breath. And the Buddha mentions this as well in his instructions on breath meditation, after focusing on the short breathing and long breathing, so you can breathe aware of the entire body. The next step is to breathe in such a way that you calm down bodily fabrication, that you calm down the breath. In the section on feelings, you’re sensitive to ways of breathing. They give rise to pleasure; they give rise to rapture. And then you notice how those factors fabricate the mind. And then you try to calm that effect down as well. Try to find feelings that are calming to the mind, ways of perceiving the breath, ways of perceiving what’s going on in your meditation in a way that calms down the mind. So the reason we focus here on the breath in this way is to sensitize ourselves to this element of fabrication. We’re trying to develop tranquility and insight together, because they need each other. If you’re just tranquil, it’s very easy to get complacent. If you just do the work of insight, the mind doesn’t have the metal tools it really needs to see things as clearly as it could. It might have all the concepts in mind, but in order to see things really clearly, the mind has to get really still. It’s these two qualities working together that give you your protection, so you really can be your own best friend. So the discernment is the part that is the friend who looks after you when you’re heedless. The concentration part is the part that’s sympathetic, shares with you. It shares its food with you. So it’s in this way that the tranquility and the insight become your friends and protectors, they offer you the refuge you need. I like to often think of the quality of refuge as being protection from the world outside. The dangers that come from the world outside are nothing from the dangers that can come up in the mind. When it’s heedless, when it’s hungry, we feed the mind well and we place a guard over it so it doesn’t pose so much danger to itself. In many of the suttas, King Vasanidhi is presented as kind of a spiritual innocent, someone who spent all of his life amassing power, never really thinking much about spiritual issues until his wife got him interested in the Buddha. And every now and then he comes to see the Buddha and says, “You know, I’ve noticed something in my dealings with people. Many of the things he notices are things that all of us take for granted. One day he comes after a really bad day in court. He was king, and back in those days the kings were also the judges. They were the ones who decided cases. So he had to spend the day listening to rich people lying so they could get more money. He says,”You know, even rich people will lie to get more money. Isn’t that amazing?” Of course, either you or I are amazed by this, but for some reason he was. Another day he comes to see the Buddha and he says, “You know, I’ve noticed that people who don’t behave well in terms of body, speech and mind, they leave themselves open to danger, even if they have armies and all the other sorts of protection around them. Their own lack of skill, their own lack of care and circumspection of their actions leaves them open to danger on all sides, even with all the armies that they have.” And the Buddha affirms that, “Yeah, that’s true.” So this is something even King Vissanity noticed, that the real dangers come from your own actions. So this is why, by training the mind in tranquility and insight with the breath, you’re protecting yourself against the most important dangers in life. When you have this protection, you’re really safe. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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